

# Chapter 1

## Desperate

Fall 2003

*Lie: I have nothing to live for.*

Several days before I attempted suicide, I stood in a church in Saint Cloud, Minnesota, surrounded by a sea of young adults with upraised hands and swaying bodies. I was at a revival for college students, and I was desperate. That's why I'd accepted this invitation from Rebekah and Easton, two seniors, Christians, who had been after my soul for weeks. They'd seen me walking past their Christian booth—perhaps they saw the quiet desperation in my eyes—and invited me to their Wednesday night praise group, and this event.

Outside of this, and the single Wednesday night I'd humored Rebekah and Easton, I wasn't attending church at all. I hadn't since age sixteen, when I left the Seventh-day Adventist Church. My college was Lutheran, but lots of students weren't religious at all. As I stood among the maze of spiritual seekers in Saint Cloud, I teetered on the brink of "not at all," but I was willing to be won over if Christianity really had anything to offer me.

I couldn't help but stare as a drummer and two guitarists banged out praise music from the stage, bodies swayed, and hands waved in the air. I felt like an anthropologist in a foreign country. My former church didn't worship like this. They didn't play drums in the sanctuary, and they never put their hands up like that.

"I could sing of your love forever," the singers sang, and the audience echoed, over and over again, almost in raptures. The people kept repeating that one line: "I could sing of your love forever, I could sing of your love forever, I could sing of your love forever . . ." until they seemed in a trance.

I tried to hide my disbelief at the frenzy building around me. Ostensibly, we were all here for a "revival," but I doubted any of these celebrators needed reviving like I did. I wasn't here for a party, or a little encouragement, or a break from homework. I desperately needed saving.

But no one was paying attention to me. Everyone, including Rebekah and

Easton, was swaying, lifting hands, closing eyes, clutching hearts. I couldn't make myself do it. *Give me something to celebrate*, I mentally dared these people.

"We're here to be revived!" the keynote speaker exclaimed, tall and imposing as he took center stage. "Glory, oh, praise Jesus!"

The audience echoed.

"We're here to renounce the devil and claim Jesus in our lives. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, you have a new life in Christ from this moment on!"

"Glory, glory!"

"God has a plan for you. We are God's sons and daughters. But the devil, he wants to steal and kill and destroy that plan. He wants to get inside your heads and take all that away. He tells us lies: *I'm no good; God can't forgive me; my family has a history of mental illness, so I will suffer mental illness too*. But by the power of the Holy Spirit, those lies have no power over us! Amen!"

"Amen! Amen!"

"Yes, Lord!"

*What?* My head spun. I'd heard about "new life in Christ" before. I'd heard about Satan's lies, and the Holy Spirit. But even so, I didn't speak this language. I didn't know anything about new life in Christ. I only knew about depression and broken families and a dying will to live.

"We denounce those lies in our lives, and they have no power over us anymore. We rebuke the devil, and we claim the Holy Spirit, and we are made new!"

*But how?* My mind screamed. *How can I be made new?*

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For years I'd looked forward to the new start college promised. No more family trouble, no more boyfriend trouble, no more depression. But at two and a half months in, I was failing at even the most basic things of college life—like the new "family" I was supposed to be part of.

At the beginning of the school year, the college had organized us freshmen into "family groups" led by capable upperclassmen. We'd spent our first week together, playing mixer games and getting oriented on campus. And these organized functions I had no trouble with; prescribed structure was easy. But now, our purely social meetings, our outings for ice cream and hamburgers, were hard. Even worse was finding people to eat lunch with or hanging out with the girls in my dorm. I didn't know how to belong in happy families. Once upon a time I'd had one of those, but it was almost before I could remember.

Indeed, I wasn't used to making friends or getting close to people; the ability to express myself freely and safely in groups had not been part of my normal experience for years.

Still, I hoped to be free and safe with at least one person, so, while the other

freshmen spent hours getting to know one another, I spent hours on the phone with Chad, my new boyfriend, who had shown up during the lonely summer leading up to college.

The closest person I had at college was my roommate, Megan, whom the college had paired me with. But after just the first day, I concluded the match was a mistake. I have a picture of us together from move-in day, standing in the midst of unpacked boxes in our new room. There's Megan, tall and smiley in her aqua tank top and cascading bronze hair, draping a skinny, unabashed arm around my shoulders. And then there's me, pale and pudgy, trying to smile as I shrink my five feet, five inches under Megan's arm, hands bunched into baggy overalls that cannot hide the ten pounds I gained over the summer—my early start on the freshman fifteen—and my thick, golden hair pulled back into an embarrassed ponytail. Megan loved the camera, and I wanted to hide—and that's the difference between Megan and me.

From day one, Megan was meeting people and making friends. It was nothing for her to walk up to someone and say, "Hi, I'm Megan. What's your name?" and start up a conversation that could last through the next meal and beyond. She seemed happiest surrounded by a group of people, traveling around campus in a pack. At night she brought new acquaintances back to the room or stayed out late with the girls on the floor. She always invited me to go with them: "Hey, we're all watching *Friends* downstairs, you wanna come?" but I declined. I felt too awkward, like a puzzle piece trying to fit into the wrong picture.

Instead of getting to know my floor-mates, I camped in my room and journaled, or I called Chad. Instead of introducing myself to people in the caf, I sat by myself. I felt miserable, but I didn't want company. Sometimes I ran late at night, while other students studied or partied. Whenever I left late in workout clothes and tennis shoes, Megan gave me strange looks. She would never do anything like that. She had no need for a dark sky under which to hide.

But I did. Something was happening inside of me. I felt myself withdrawing more every day . . . from Megan, from Chad, from classwork, from the idea of life itself. *I could just end the pain right now*, a voice whispered every day in my ear. But I tried to push it away.

One night a few weeks into the semester, Megan and I lay sprawled on our loft beds, heads just feet apart. I was trying to journal, but she kept jabbering on and on about classes and new friends and the gigantic selection of food in the cafeteria and how, one day, she had just looked out the window and decided the world was a beautiful place.

"Um-hmm," I kept saying, trying to look interested. I hoped she would get the hint and stop talking.

"So, Lindsey," she said, flipping her shimmery hair over her shoulder, "How are you liking it here? What types of people are you meeting? How are you enjoying the college experience?"

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. For the first time in twenty minutes, Megan was completely silent and looking straight at me.

I searched my thoughts for some response I could give. *I hate this place. I hate my life. I don't want to meet people. I don't want to do anything. Life seems hopeless.* I chose the only acceptable answer: "Well, I'm still getting used to it."

Megan waited a moment more and then responded, "Well, I hope everything's OK. I've noticed you don't seem too happy."

*Try suicidal,* I thought.

"I'm happy to listen if you need to talk about anything."

Inwardly, I snorted. It was a nice offer, but I was sure her ears weren't big enough to handle everything I needed to talk about.

*No one's ears are big enough to handle my problems,* I thought.

"I appreciate your offer, but it's not a big deal. I have a little history with depression, and recently I stopped my medication." With my psychiatrist's consent, I had tapered off my Zoloft during the month of August.

"I think I'm just having some withdrawals," I said, shrugging. "I think it'll just take a little time for my system to get back on track."

I didn't mention that I couldn't even fathom what "on track" meant for me. When was the last time my life had been on track?

"Oh." Megan nodded. "I totally know what you're talking about."

*Wanna bet?* I thought. I raised skeptical eyebrows.

Megan said she had a history with depression too. But what she called "depression" sounded no worse than PMS. I couldn't relate to the experiences she described. She told me that whenever her mood began to deteriorate, she would give herself a "pep talk": "Come on, Megan, snap out of it." One time she spilled her guts to a counselor, only to hear at the end of the hour, "I can't really help you—you sound like you're already working it out." She said she could go to a psychiatrist feeling awful and at the end of a session be "all better." The apex of her condition came one time after two weeks of the blues. Sitting in the bathtub she cried out, "God, if I can't help myself, how can I help anyone else?" Suddenly, she said, she felt peace. It was a deeply spiritual experience. And she'd been happy ever since.

I kept waiting for her to mention the quandary about wanting to die, the question of life's meaning, and suicidal thoughts or attempts, but she never got there. And as she talked on and on about "overcoming depression," I decided she knew nothing about the subject.

Sadly, neither did I.

Through the next days and weeks and the falling leaves of autumn, I tried to let Megan's zest for life inspire me; but the harder I tried to keep up with her, the further behind I fell. Instead of feeling encouraged, I felt drained.

*I'm so screwed up,* I wrote on pages I planned to show no one. Who could ever understand? *I'll never be happy. I have no future, except this dismal depression.*

One late night when I staggered in from a run, Megan looked up in alarm. “Honey, are you *OK*?”

I flopped to the floor and tugged off my shoes. “Sure.”

She didn’t look like she believed me.

“What were you doing out running this late? You know I would’ve gone with you, don’t you? You know you don’t have to go alone.”

I half smiled. “I know, thanks,” I said. But I knew full well that I would never ask her to come with me; I knew full well that there was no other way than for me to go it alone.

Chad broke up with me in early October, and from there, I faded fast.

Thoughts of quitting college turned to thoughts of quitting life. I decided that if God didn’t do something drastic, I would. And so, at nineteen, I found myself at a revival meeting without hope, except for one: maybe God would show up to talk me out of killing myself.

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All around me, young men and women moaned, “Oh, Jesus, thank You, Jesus,” as if mighty burdens were being lifted. But inside, all I felt was confusion and growing despair. Nothing the speaker said resonated with me except those negative thoughts that he said were Satan’s lies. The “lies” sounded exactly like the thoughts in my head, but I could not denounce them because they weren’t really lies: in my clouded understanding, they were *who I was*, and who I had been for the past five years.

How could he tell me to simply deny the “truth” I’d lived with for so many years and be free, right here and right now? How could he tell me I had a “new life,” when a quick body check told me I was still the same miserable girl who had stepped into this church? I was still the girl with no “home,” the girl who’d been dumped, the girl who couldn’t muster a reason or a will to live.

I left feeling worse than when I’d come.

When our bus returned to campus, I headed to the basement of Pitts Hall, turned on one of the thirteen desktop computers, and opened a blank document.

“To everyone who has ever loved me . . .” I typed, relief cascading through my body.

All around me, my college-mates wrote essays, emailed professors, chatted online with friends back home . . . while I slowly, thoughtfully drafted my suicide note.

One hour later, I printed the document and went upstairs. The next day I would withdraw from college. I would make the arrangements and buy the supplies. And finally, I would end the pain. If God had other plans—if there even was a God—He’d have to intervene; as of that day, I was done trying at this game of faith and this game of life.